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Oral Interpretation of English Stories and Folktales

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What is Oral Interpretation? Oral Interpretation (OI) is communicating fully the meaning and emotion of written language through speech.

What??

Oral Interpretation is performing story material in a way that clearly differentiates and delineates the individual characters to educate and entertain listeners and observers.

Entertain and educate? How? Material such as children's stories about other lands and cultures, fables like the slow turtle winning the race against the fast hare, movie scripts, play texts, favorite nursery rhymes, etc. all entertain. And fables are teaching a lesson — like slow and steady wins the race; and stories about other cultures teach and instruct. Stories like the “Three Pigs” are fun and teach lessons about preparing for the future — e.g., building a house of stone to be safe from the huffing and puffing wolf.

We hope you will take some ideas from this paper that you can use in your classes to make learning English more fun for your students and open a new dimension for them. Presentations can be done alone, in pairs of students, or three or more students. Children's stories with multiple characters make interesting, challenging and attention-grabbing presentations.

This very successful course was originated by Professor Peter Gray at Hokusei Gakuen University. By way of introduction, Peter has expressed this much better than I could, so with his permission, I will paraphrase his introductory definitions.

What does interpretation mean in each of these sentences?

1. Your English interpretation of this Japanese sentence is correct.
(translation)
2. There are several interpretations of this painting by Picasso.
(explanation)
3. The orchestra's interpretation of Mozart's symphony was beautiful.
(expression/version)

The “interpretation” in Oral Interpretation has the same meaning as sentence 3, a uniquely expressed version of given material.

A step further : If we were to listen to the original version of the famous American rock song “Johnny B. Goode,” and then listen to a cover version (interpretation) of the song, the interpretation of this song is different for several reasons.

Performer (who)	Chuck Berry	Peter Tosh
Audience (to whom)	Americans	Jamaicans
Time (when)	1957	1983
Place (where)	U.S.	Jamaica
Purpose (why)	Rock is great!	Reggae is great!

The interpretation of each of these renditions was different because of the frame of reference and different settings, difference in audience, and preferences as to type of music.

The four basic steps of Oral Interpretation:

1. Choose the material.
2. Understand the material.
3. Rehearse the material.
4. Perform the material.

Some general guidelines for performances are also valid for any type of public speaking: stand straight but relaxed; hold script so that it is visible but not hiding your face or such that your head is positioned down rather than toward your audience; eye contact is not necessary with the audience, but be sure you speak clearly and with sufficient volume to reach the people in the back of the room, and acknowledge the applause from the audience. The class — playing the part of audience — should listen quietly and politely, look up at the performer not down at the script, and clap in appreciation at the end of the performance.

Pay attention to the difference between reading and oral interpretation. How many characters are there in this story? How many voices? Analyze the personality of the characters in the script — what kind of a voice would fit that character, e.g., an older male rooster could have a deep, slow but authoritative drawl; a little chick could have a quick, high pitched squeaky staccato speech style, etc.

What are some techniques you can use to contribute interest to your presentation of fable, literature, film script, monologue, epic poem, report, etc.? Two essential foundations are understanding the material you want to perform and speaking with good pronunciation. The following techniques can be used in combination. They require practice, and understanding the material/analysis of the characters will help you choose which techniques contribute most to your presentation.

1. Some basic techniques involve stress. A practice sentence to illustrate this is “I don’t want to talk to you anymore.” Read it several times each time putting stress on a different word; can you hear the difference in meaning due to interpretation?
2. A pause can be very effective in drawing extra attention to a following word or phrase. Insert some pauses into this sentence: “Mary opened the door, walked in to the dark room, heard a noise, and screamed.”

3. Speed also plays a role in drawing attention to what is being said.
4. Volume variations from soft to normal to loud can also heighten the emotion you are trying to express.
5. Pitch changes (high - normal - low) are very useful in differentiating characters, especially when you are using a work that has many characters/voices.
6. Changing intonation is useful in comments and questions, especially at the end of a phrase.
7. Emotional tone in your voice can change the meaning of the words. Saying a cheery “Good Morning” to a lovely friend whom you like and saying “Good Morning” to a boring, mean-spirited person you do not like, uses the same words; however, the emotional tone in your voice (backed up by body language) conveys a very different message.
8. Sound effects can contribute to livening up your presentation but must be used appropriately and sparingly. “There was a faint knock (sound effect) at the door,” or “The huge dog growled at the stranger (sound effect),” or “(sighing) I’m too tired to work any more.”

After teaching various foreign languages and ESL at several universities in the US and Middle East, the author was surprised to find new unique challenges in her first year of teaching in Japan. The immediate challenge was getting students, especially young high school ladies, to speak up loud enough to be heard in the front of the class, let alone in the back of the class where the author usually sits to evaluate a presentation (including volume, enunciation, pronunciation, flow and clarity, correct grammar, proper speaking stance, holding manuscript, etc.).

Why is this an issue? “To watch the Express...speak is to see the epitome of idealized Japanese womanhood. Her voice is incredibly soft, her face almost frozen in a semi-smile and her manner exudes poise and refinement.” That quote described the ideal woman of Japanese culture. So speaking up in class, loudly enough to be heard at the back of the room without using a microphone would appear to be against traditional culture.

To try to get around this problem, I made folded little notes with one activity to execute before the class which students randomly picked. (Each note instructed the student to show anger, grief, injury, surprise, infant behavior, happiness, shock, etc.). They could practice with a partner — advising each other — for ten minutes before presentation to the class. After repeating this class activity, it helped somewhat to overcome the reluctance to loosen up in front of the class.

Sample presentation of possible OI material could be the story “The Three Bears.”

Besides the characters in the material chosen for presentation (story, movie, etc.), sometimes a narrator is necessary to bind the parts of the story together and set the scene. For example in “The Three Bears,” a narrator is needed to explain the setting, that the three bears are going for a walk and Goldilocks wanders into their house and the narrator then describes her actions. When the bears come back, each bear speaks out his reaction to what has happened so we can follow the story from their dialogue and no longer need a narrator to connect the parts.

Since in OI, the different characters are recognizable by their different voices, pitch, speed, etc., let us look at how to choose a voice for a character.

The narrator can have a normal, non-outstanding voice, no accent, blending in. The narrator is needed to describe the setting and actions if the distinct voices of the characters do not convey what is happening. (Sort of the Greek chorus of the story.)

Let us take the story “Henny Penny” and analyze the characters and figure out what type of voice, personality, etc., we think that they have. These characterizations are subject to class perceptions and will differ from presenting group to presenting group.

Henny Penny is a ditsy hen, nervous, flighty, good hearted — moves quickly. Definitely not a ballet dancer type! The quick, jerky movements assist in rounding out her character type.

Cocky Locky is a proud rooster type, deep voice, accustomed to being the king of the barnyard. Head held high, imposing walk, looks down his beak at all whom he considers his subjects, etc.

Ducky Daddles — think Donald Duck. Quacky, nasal voice; not too bright; good hearted, hot temper, easily annoyed, a follower not a leader.

Goosey Poosey has a honky voice, unhurried Southern accent, portly, slow-moving, just sort of ambles through life. Big enough not to have to throw his weight around to be noticed, he has a sort of Sumo wrestler walk.

Turkey Lurkey is well fed, unhurried, laidback, not very talkative (i.e., no lines to speak in this story!), friendly, not overly ambitious.

Foxy Woxy, with his oily smooth velvety voice, sly smile, deceitful helpful demeanor, self-centered with slinking-body action, slides around corners, glides when other people/animals walk...

Other scripts that can be used come from movies or TV, such as “The Odd Couple,” “The Wizard of Oz,” “Kramer vs. Kramer,” “Schreck,” “Pretty Woman,” monologues or poems such as epic poetry by Longfellow, “The Song of Hiawatha,” or works such as “Ozymandias” or Shakespeare’s “The Seven Stages of Man” or Milton’s “On My Blindness” or The scope is virtually unlimited.

What do students get from an OI class based on the above guidelines and suggestions? They are introduced to fun English practice and further language acquisition via new literature of various genres; they learn ways to make their reading of literature come alive, and add public speaking skills which are also useful in business meeting presentations for lightening up the mood when things get tense, or getting serious points across by variation of volume, speed, pitch. And if the professional future does not present these opportunities to utilize the skills obtained in this class, reading bedtime stories in any language using Oral Interpretation techniques will make bedtime for children or your grandchildren — and you — more memorable and enjoyable.

Hopefully, this discussion has given you some new ideas and techniques to gladden the spirits and further motivate your ESL class students.

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